

The Courage to Worship

[Luke 23:6-12](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Everyone has heard stories from people who prayed and were thrilled by the ways God answered their prayers. But what about the times when God remains silent?

As Luke tells us the story of Jesus, he makes it clear the Savior's popularity spread quickly across Galilee. Jesus began his ministry teaching in the synagogues, "and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country" (4:14). Later Jesus cast out a demon, "and a report about him began to reach every place in the region" (4:37). He healed a paralytic in front of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Again Luke tells us, "They had come from every village of Galilee and Judea, and from Jerusalem" (5:17). When Jesus came upon a funeral procession for a man in the town of Nain, he had compassion for the man's weeping mother, so he raised her son from the dead. The people who saw this said, "A great prophet has risen among us." Then again Luke adds, "This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country" (7:17).

According to Luke everyone in the country was talking about the amazing acts of Jesus. This isn't hard to believe. Jesus taught like no one the people had ever heard before. Not only did he teach, but he also cast out evil, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Yeah, I think that word of these things traveled pretty fast and far. It has even traveled 2,000 years to our own time. We too have heard about the miraculous things Jesus did.

Wouldn't you love to have seen just one of these miracles? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you didn't have only to rely on what you've heard? Maybe you feel like saying, "Just one bonafide miracle, Jesus. That's all I want. Just one, and I would believe."

You're not the only one who missed seeing the miracles and had to rely on the testimony of others. Luke also tells us, "Now Herod the ruler heard about all that had taken place, and he was perplexed...and he tried to see him" (9:7). But King Herod never saw a single miracle when Jesus was in Galilee. Perhaps he assumed that if he just sent an invitation for Jesus to come to the palace, Jesus would jump at the chance to have a royal audience. But Jesus wasn't interested in performing for Herod. Jesus wasn't interested in performing for anyone. His miracles were always only signs of his ability to heal the soul.

Herod wasn't exactly looking for someone heal his soul. The last time a great prophet had risen among the people it was John the Baptist. When John tried to speak to Herod's soul, he was thrown in prison and eventually killed. So when some of the Pharisees tried to warn Jesus that Herod wanted to see him, they assumed it was because the king wanted to kill him as well. But Jesus responded by telling them to go and tell "that fox" that today is the day for healing. "The day for my death will come when I am in Jerusalem" (13:31-33).

Well, now that day has come. In our text today Jesus is standing for his third trial. Over the last two weeks, we have watched as Jesus was tried first by the religious leaders and then by Pontius Pilate. But Pilate was uncomfortable trying a man who was clearly innocent, so when he learned that Herod was visiting in Jerusalem, he sent Jesus to him. Now Herod finally gets to meet Jesus face to face.

When we began to look at Jesus' three trials, I told you to look closely at the probing questions that were asked of him, for these questions reveal the great longings of the soul. The religious leaders asked Jesus if he were the messiah, the one who could save. Pilate asked Jesus if he were a king, one worthy of the bureaucrat's service. By contrast, Herod doesn't bring his deep questions and longings to Jesus. Instead,

we are told that Herod "was hoping to see him perform some sign" (23:8). As Luke describes it, this scene doesn't even look like a trial. It looks like a circus. Or at least, that is what Herod was trying to turn it into. It was as if this king who had grown accustomed to being entertained had said, "Okay, Jesus, you have my attention. Do something spectacular." But Jesus stood silent before the king.

Of all the characters in the passion of Jesus, it is easiest for us to dismiss Herod, because we really can't relate to him. But I wonder. Again, wouldn't you love for Jesus to perform some sign for you? Just one? Wouldn't it be nice if he just showed up in your car on the way home from a terrible day at work to say, "Dump this job. I have something better for you to do." Or how about if Jesus miraculously took away your disease, or all the terrorists, or all the loneliness? Would you believe then?

I think not. The Pharisees saw the miracles and still did not believe. The crowd saw the miracles and still turned away from Jesus in the end. The guards at Jesus' tomb saw the greatest miracle of all and they still did not believe. We don't believe what we see; we see what we believe. The place where belief is born is in the soul, and not the eyes. The time when it is born is when Jesus is silent, and not when he is performing miracles. It is the silence that makes room for your choices. And that is what faith is -- a choice. It isn't an act of emotion or an act of the intellect. It's an act of the will.

Herod missed all this, but as Jesus stood silently in front of him, the king was being given the opportunity to make the ultimate choice of his life. But I have seen others who didn't miss their moment.

I have been in my office talking to someone who had lost a job and been out of work for a year. Then he lost his savings, and with tears in his eyes, he described how awful it was to tell his children that they were also losing their house. He told me all this only to take my hand and ask me to pray again. I have been in hospital rooms right after the doctor announced the disease had spread too far, and there was nothing more they could do only to have the person in bed hold my hand and ask me to pray again. I have been at gravesides right after the casket was lowered into the ground, only to have the grieving widow hold my hand and ask me to pray again.

Why are we praying now? We prayed before the job, the health, or the husband was lost. And Jesus remained silent. So why do they take my hand and ask me to pray again? Because in that prayer, they have heroically chosen to take the hand of a Savior they do not understand. Because they are choosing to let God be God. And because they are choosing to worship. You cannot worship a God for whom you have a use. When you reduce God to his instrumental value, you lose God. And then you lose yourself.

Herod had long ago lost himself in luxury and power. He wasn't looking to find a Savior for his soul. Like some of us he was bored and was looking for a distraction. When Jesus refused to perform for him, Herod threw an elegant robe on Jesus, decorated him, and mocked him with his soldiers.

That is exactly what we do when we insist that Jesus perform for us as well. We decorate Jesus as our boyfriend when we only want him to be the better lover. We decorate him as our magician when we only want him to make our boss disappear. We decorate him as our sacred image of ourselves when we only want to hear that we are right. It is all just a way of mocking this one who is the incarnation of God among us. You can decorate Jesus anyway you want to, you can even mock him, but you can't make him perform for you. If some have endured crisis after praying to avoid it, don't be too surprised if Jesus remains silent when you pray for an empty parking place at church on Sunday. The reason we come to church is to bow our heads in the presence of one who precisely does not respond every time we send a celestial e-mail. We come to worship because our souls thirst for God. And part of the character of God is that he cannot be contained or captured by the yearning of his people.

Now some of these yearnings are for wonderful things. We can get by without the parking spaces and the bigger house, but how do you find a faith that is heroic enough still to worship in the moments when Jesus is silent to your requests for a job, health, or a loved one who just died?

I'll tell you. Everybody I know who has made the heroic choice to believe in the face of crisis was prepared for those moments. The way they got prepared was by a lifetime of worship, prayer, and Bible study. That is why we give Bibles to the third graders in our Sunday school, as we did in worship today. It is to prepare

them for the hard moments that will come for every one of them. What we have given them is a holy Word that will continue to speak, even on the days when the miracles don't come.

If the silent response to your prayers is hard on you, read the Bible. Read it daily. Take it to heart. Get into a class at church. Form a Bible study with your friends. Because the Bible is God's Word to you, and it is a Word that breaks the silence.

By the Holy Spirit, God is always speaking through the sacred texts. In fact, he is telling you more than you probably want to know.

O God, by your Holy Spirit, allow us to hear your Holy Word in scripture, that we may find the courage to believe and worship even when you are reduced to your benefits toward us. Amen.